



## CAN ASSOCIATIONS CUT THROUGH THE JUNGLE OF INFORMATION OVERLOAD?

IN THE AGE OF OVERFLOWING INBOXES, HOW CAN ASSOCIATIONS COMMUNICATE VALUE IN A COMPELLING WAY? HOW TO CUT THROUGH THE NOISE?

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Perhaps even more preoccupying, the internet provides a wealth of free information on virtually any topic at the click of a button, that competes with association-produced content. How can associations become the preferred source of their members?

### Associations need to stop automatically cranking out information in a we've-always-done-it-this-way mindset and to start thinking strategically about helping members zoom in on the right information

I believe that the answers lie in helping to simplify life for members. Rather than dumping more reading material on members, savvy associations will figure out how to help them cut through the jungle to reach the hidden temple of knowledge. This means that associations need to stop automatically cranking out information in a we've-always-done-it-this-way mindset and to start thinking strategically about helping members zoom in on the right information. It also means coming to terms with the need to push content out to where members are online when doing their jobs, rather than expecting them to come to our destination websites.

Several commentators have recently disputed the concept of information overload as a recurring myth of humanity: even the printing press was considered problematic because more books had become available than an individual could read in a single lifetime. Each time systems were developed to manage the problem: in the case of books the solution included cataloguing systems and schools. David McCraney notes that even hunters/gatherers in the jungle deal

with massive quantities of data; their coping mechanisms include teaching the essentials through storytelling.

Clay Shirky states that the problem is not information overload, but '*filter failure*'. We used to expect information producers (publishers) and librarians to tell us what was important. Today, the responsibility for filtering has shifted to the individual, but most people are not yet very good at it.

This creates a huge opportunity for associations. Chris Hall, Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer at the International

Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and his team are working to build a 'discovery engine' for IABC's online library. Among other things, it will suggest content based on semantically similar terms and provide feedback on how other members have rated various items.

Some of the questions that we association executives should be asking ourselves include:

- + Does the association have a strategy focused on helping members pinpoint the content that is most relevant for them, or are the association's communications focused on broadcasting and just adding to the noise?
- + Do we have staff members who are knowledgeable about rapid developments in communication technology? Are those same employees cognizant of the needs of their colleagues and members?
- + Are content experts being trained to understand and use new tools for maximum benefit?
- + Are we taking advantage of how social media make it possible for members to guide each other by rating and 'sharing' content directly in our online libraries? Are we using new syndication tools that make it easy to link multiple social media channels so that they talk to and feed one another?

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